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# Callas Books: 'Cast a Diva: The Hidden Life of Maria Callas' by Lyndsy Spence

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*Cast a Diva: The Hidden Life of Maria Callas*

By Lyndsy Spence

Hard cover; size book: 24x16 cm

Pages: 304

Photographs (all in black/white): 52

Language: English

Publisher: The History Press,  
Cheltenham, 2021

[www.thehistorypress.co.uk](http://www.thehistorypress.co.uk)

ISBN 978 0 7509 9419 4

Price £20.00

After the recently published book *The Psychology of Maria Callas* by Paul Wink (reviewed in our March issue) another rather 'difficult' book about Maria Callas has been published, *Cast a Diva: The Hidden Life of Maria Callas*, written by Lyndsy Spence. The book adds to the ex-

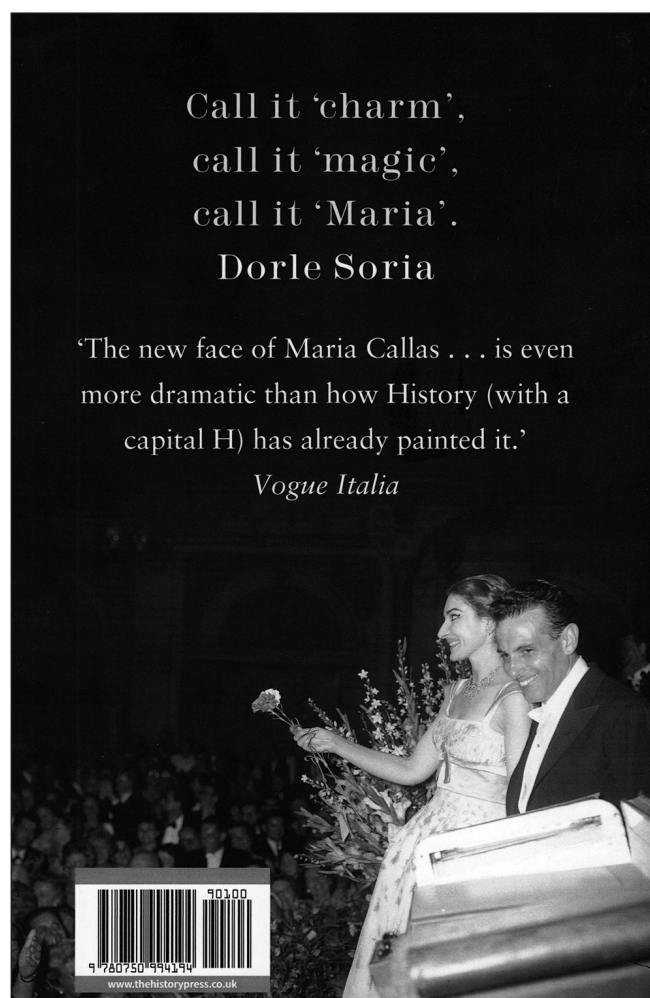
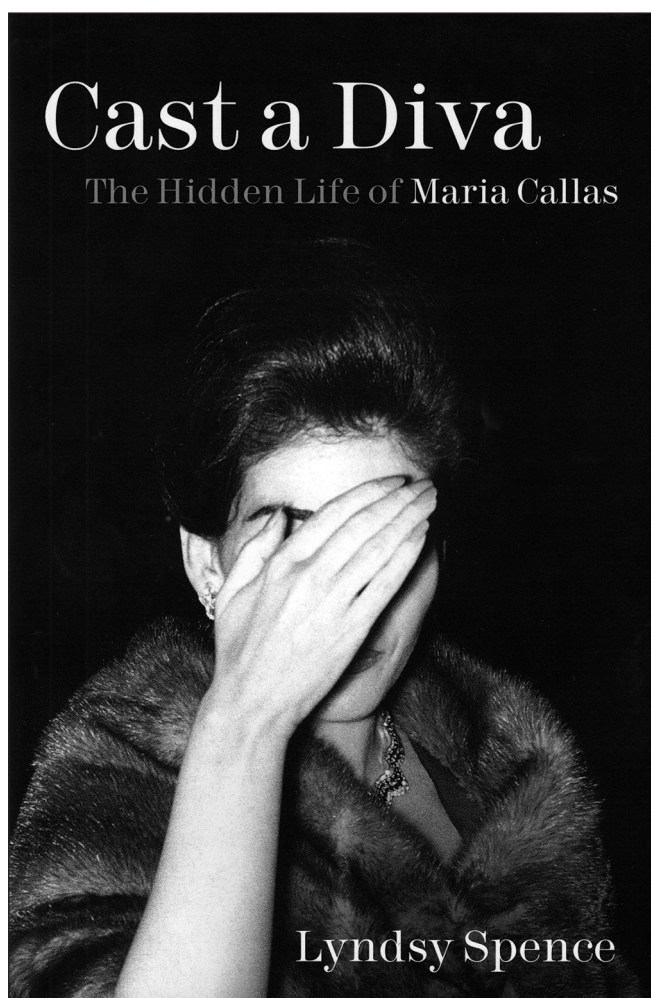
Karl H. van Zoggel

tensive bibliography that is already available about the singer. The pre-announcements of this book could not be missed. After Spence's own introduction on <https://culturall.io> on 21 January 2021 and, among others, the article in *The Guardian* on 11 April (both hereafter reproduced), as well as the big headlines in other publications, it could be expected that part of the contents of the book would be very surprising and revealing. After having read the book carefully it can be said that the book is well-written and reads like a fascinating novel about a woman with a turbulent and tragic life. Yet it is about the late world-famous soprano Maria Cal-

las whose life and career have been written about in abundance for more than 50 years.

The text on the dust cover gives the following information about the author: "Lyndsy Spence is an author, historian and screenwriter who specialises in daring aristocratic women. She is the founder of The Mitford Society, an online community dedicated to the Mitford girls, and is the author of the bestselling biography *The Grit in the Pearl: The Scandalous Life of Margaret, Duchess of Argyll*."

The dust cover further introduces the book as follows: "Maria Callas (1923-1977) was the greatest opera diva of all time. Despite a career that remains unmatched by any prima donna, much of her life was overshadowed by her fiery relationship with Aristotle Onassis, who broke her



heart when he left her for Jacqueline Kennedy, and her legendary tantrums on and off the stage. However, little is known about the woman behind the diva ...”

Although the first sentences of this introduction are correct, the last one is surely not, having a few hundred books about her of which roughly two thirds are about the “woman behind the diva”.

The contents of the book are as follows: Acknowledgements, Author’s Note, 20 chapters text, Epilogue, Notes, Select Bibliography and Index.

As Callas’ operatic career and art are not hidden, it is logical that the book deals only superficially with these aspects which are for Callas’ fans most important. The knowledge about the soprano varies greatly among (potential) readers of the book: those who are very much aware of her life and career (I think about the members of our *Maria Callas International Club*, who have the possibility to consult more than 90 *Maria Callas Magazines*, next to their collection of books and publications) and those for whom Callas is a rather unknown person and artist.

Of course, I welcome very much the hidden (albeit limited) information in many letters and some documents that Spence reveals for the first time. The most interesting and informative, sometimes surprising, ‘hidden’ sources are Callas’ godfather, Leonidas Lantzounis (his letters were acquired by our then-member Robert Baxter, and after Baxter’s death the letters came as a legacy in the archives of the Stanford University Libraries), Callas’ father (Music School of Kalamata), writer and critic Leo Lerman (Columbia University), Dorle Soria (wife of Dario Soria, Angel’s director) and Walter Cummings (Callas’ attorney in Chicago). Yet to be noted is that the subjects in Callas’ letters (interviews, etc.) always have to be valued with some prudence as Callas’ ‘truth’ differed sometimes from time to time and from case by case.

Based on the many notes in the book, it is clear that Spence has done a great deal of reading and research, but the Se-



**Lyndsy Spence during an 18-minute interview with Yanna Darilis on New Greek Television (NGTV), programme In the Spotlight, posted on YouTube 6 July 2021, link: [youtube.com/watch?v=dfLgnpl\\_Bdl](https://youtube.com/watch?v=dfLgnpl_Bdl)**

lect Bibliography is indeed a selection and based on English publications only. Regrettably, the notes refer only to one article (published on our Club’s website) from our *Maria Callas Magazines*, and a number of articles and relevant books are missing such as by Ardoin, Bünch, Gage, Guandalini, Hanine-Roussel, Jell-

inek, Lowe, Rémy, Stassinopoulos, Wink and Wolf. The notes are very helpful but creatively used so that sometimes the references do not precisely match with what is written or suggested.

It is a pity that the Index is not always clear and far from complete.

About the photographs printed in the book one can only be rather disappointed: the problem is of course not that all are printed in black and white and that almost all are printed in a rather small format (see some of the published photograph pages in this review). But while the book shows a more or less scientific approach, the choice of the photographs and their captions are not dealt with much seriousness. Captions are missing, and if not, they are not always correct, and often with a banal indication as “Glimpses of Maria’s childhood”, “Maria in the 1940s”, “Candid Callas in the 1950s (and 1960s, and 1970s)”. Maybe not surprisingly there is not one photograph with Callas in an operatic role on stage. Only one of the photographs was new to me.

While reading, an ever-growing mood of sadness emerges as everything in Callas’ life seems negative, including Meneghini’s behaviour, who according to the book hasn’t done any good. The book describes Callas’ life from the very beginning to the very end and, understandably, Spence couldn’t tackle, or wasn’t aware of, a number of events. Overall, the texts are correct, but several times facts are mistaken or incomplete. To name a few: Callas didn’t travel to Chicago in 1947; Bagarozzy died in 1967, not 1958; Onassis didn’t attend the ball at the Hotel Danieli in Venice and did not attend the concert in Paris on 19 December 1958; there is no underground passage between the Hotel Quirinale and the Rome opera theatre; Callas didn’t visit Paris in 1957.

To end my review, I would like to bring two specific subjects to the fore and deal with both in more detail (see next pages): the Nina Foresti case and the subject of Omero Lenigrini, the baby of Callas and Onassis.





**THE MAJOR BOWES AMATEUR HOUR WITH NINA FORESTI/ANITA DUVAL, NEW YORK 1935**

On pp. 14-16 Spence deals with this matter. She writes: "A theory exists that Maria applied for talent shows under the names Anita Duval and Nina Foresti, ..." and refers to quotes by Callas in Nadia Stancioff's book *MARIA – Callas Remembered*: "I called myself Anita Duval ... Afterwards, I switched to Nina Foresti. I thought that sounded more like an opera singer." Contrary (a habit which was not so unusual for Callas) to what Callas wrote to Olive Haddock in 1968: "The *Butterfly* piece is not true – I always called myself by my own name."



The real Anita Duval/Nina Foresti photographed in the 1950s.

Photo in Lyndsy Spence's book

About this 'theory', David Crothers wrote a very practised, detailed, illustrated and factual 20-page-article in *Maria Callas Magazine* No. 88 – November 2019. His conclusion – based on researching all the known facts and documents, and having personally searched through the Major Bowes Collection of The Library of Congress in Washington – was that he is 100% sure that Callas was the same person as Anita Duval/Nina Foresti, who appeared on the *Major Bowes Amateur Hour* on 29 March 1935 and broadcast on 7 April.

This conclusion was mainly based on:

- Callas herself, who mentioned appearing in the show to Ed Murrow, David Frost and Nadia Stancioff.
- Others, who mentioned the Major Bowes show: Jack Benny, George Jellinek, John Ardoin, Steven Linakis and Jackie Callas.
- Very strong similarities between the handwriting on the letter and application form, dated 13 March 1935, with other handwritings by Callas, as explicitly proved by Crothers, Callas' handwriting expert.
- Research by Crothers of Ardoin's publications and letters on the matter and a personal view of the Major Bowes Collection at The Library of Congress in Washington.

Spence has to be complimented on finding a soprano with the name of Nina



Annette Duval in 1938, photo uploaded from [www.ancestry.com](http://www.ancestry.com) on 27 February 2021 (Courtesy of David Crothers)

Foresti, who in fact is Annette Duval, born in Pennsylvania in 1915. It makes this already very interesting case yet more fascinating and intriguing. Spence shows that "Nina Foresti, soprano" was broadcast on WCDA radio for 15 minutes (programme unknown) on 10 May 1928, thus at the age of 13. Spence further quotes the newspaper *The Lafayette* from Easton, PA, dated 24 October 1933: "Next Tuesday night, October 24, the long-awaited performance of the New York Opera Company will become a reality on the stage of the Orpheum Thea-

tre ... *Pagliacci* will be presented under the supervision and general direction of Maestro dell'Orefice, [Enzo Dell'Orefice] former coach of Enrico Caruso ... The role of Nedda will be played by Nina Foresti, talented American singer."

Both references show that there was indeed a soprano named Nina Foresti and the above-mentioned details of her singing matches closely the details on the application form, dated 11 March 1935, sent to the Major Bowes Staff one and a half years later.

Spence includes more details about the soprano: "Evidence proves [not further detailed] that Nina Foresti was the stage name of a young Italian-American woman named Anita Duval, who gave her address as 549 W. 144th Street in Washington Heights. ... Duval/Foresti was born Annette Duval in Pennsylvania in 1915, to a rich family who lost their fortune in the Wall Street Crash. Graduating from school, she sang on the newly established radio network, WCDA and in 1928, [this should be 1933] performed as Nedda in *Pagliacci* with the New York Opera, as mentioned in the *Easton Lafayette*. [see earlier]... After appearing on the *Major Bowes Amateur Hour*, she resumed her position at the department store, Strawbridge & Clothier [having its headquarters in Philadelphia]. What remains interesting is the inclusion of Duval/Foresti's 'Un bel di' on Maria's recording for EMI, and that Duval/Foresti never revealed her identity nor sought to correct

the error. Given that her opera career petered out in 1935, perhaps she enjoyed being associated with Maria, knowing that her voice has been heard by millions.”

It is now certain that Anita Duval/ Nina Foresti (Annette Duval) is the soprano in question with regard to the Major Bowes show, but that doesn't take away the involvement of Callas at the show as justified in Crothers' article.

It is generally accepted that the speaking voice during the interview with Major Bowes is Callas'. That can now be confirmed for sure: "... father's laboratory has closed, ... father was a chemist." Crothers discovered from the census 1920 and 1930 that Annette's father (Joseph E.) was a wholesale merchant in woollen yarns. Further: "You are Italian-American?" Callas was Greek-American, and "I was born here in New York". Annette was born in Massachusetts and her father came from France/Canada.

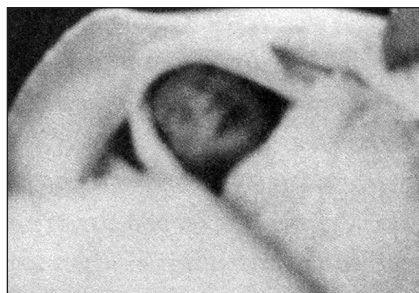
It is likely that Callas – and her mother, and maybe sister – met the soprano Annette (then 20 years old) in New York. Otherwise the names of Duval and Foresti (and *Major Bowes Amateur Hour*) were not mentioned at all in a number of publications. Possibly, Annette was in New York in 1935, following her opera performances with the New York Opera Company under Enzo Dell'Orefice, in 1933. As Callas was 11 years old, she must have been accompanied by an older person and apparently that was Annette, who also helped Callas write the application form, changing Annette's name into Anita and mentioning some details from Annette's life and career.

Whether the singing voice of 'Un bel di' is that of Callas is still a matter for discussion; many think that the voice isn't that of Callas. Let's assume that the singer was not Callas, then it surely must have been Annette. The question then is if, how, when and by whom the tape with Callas' voice was replaced by a tape with Duval aka Foresti's voice. For now, the only reason I can imagine is that Callas' singing – Seymour's appreciation was "Faint Possibility for Future" – wasn't approved so that Annette had to sing the aria also, and that that aria was taped and broadcast. Fortunately, Crothers is still investigating this matter and any further information that becomes available will be published in the November Magazine.

### OMERO LENGRI, THE BABY BOY OF CALLAS AND ONASSIS, 1960

About this delicate matter Spence writes on pp. 164-165 that Callas conceived a child in early 1960 and that she suffered a miscarriage after her cancelled concert (on 21 July 1960) in Ostend. She suggests, also, referring to what Giovanna Lomazzi apparently told her, that Callas went to a clinic for an abortion, or another way to end her pregnancy. In her Epilogue (p.261) Spence doubts very much the reliability of the information about the baby and in the footnote, she refers for the first time in her book to Nicholas Gage's *Greek Fire* (New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 2000) and queries what Gage found out and wrote about it.

I think, Spence is very obscure about this matter, without real (counter) arguments, and serious research is hardly noticeable. Gage, who brought up this matter in 2000 for the first time, had a lot of interesting details about the matter of the baby boy to say and his findings earn much more attention and praise. At the time, Gage's book induced me to look more deeply into this case and on 12 October 2006 I had the opportunity of visiting the Civil Service Department of the Municipality of Milan. From this service I acquired handwritten (instead of the typed documents that Gage reproduced) documents about the birth and, after 8 hours, death of the boy



Omero Lengri, on 30 March 1960. That this baby was delivered by Caesarean, was personally confirmed to me by some staff members of Clinica Dezza in Milan (located not so far from Callas' house at Via Buonarroti) where Callas' gynaecologist, Dr. Carlo Palmieri, worked at the time. Further I learned from the clinic that the baby was baptized in the nearby San Rosario Church and that the body was buried at the Civico Cimitero of Bresso, near Milan.

Since 2000 hardly a publication has been issued in which Callas/Onassis' baby has been argued as fiction. The fact of the baby boy was confirmed by a few members of our Club who knew Callas very well. Moreover, of essential importance and of decisive evidence, is the

fact that Callas' long-time maid Bruna Lupoli has declared in an interview with journalist Giangavino Sulas (see the article in *OGGI*, September 2003, which was unknown to me in 2006), that the baby boy indeed had been born and died on 30 March 1960 in the clinic. Furthermore, she had taken the photograph of the boy, the same photograph that Gage reproduced in his book.

For more details and arguments on this matter I refer you to my article in *Maria Callas Magazine* No. 49 – November 2006, which is reproduced on the website [www.callasintclub.com](http://www.callasintclub.com) Articles, text 7.

Monte Carlo, 5 August 1960, with Aristotle Onassis

